

Book Review

Giving voices to mollusks, a review of *Shells on a Desert Shore: Mollusks in the Seri World*

Cathy Moser Marlett. 2014. **Shells on a Desert Shore: Mollusks in the Seri World.** University of Arizona Press, P.O. Box 210055, Tucson, AZ 85721 USA, 304 pages, ISBN: 978-0-8165-3068-7, US\$75.

Mollusks and humans have made history together for a very long time. One hundred thousand years ago, humans in South Africa used the shells of *Haliotis midae* Linnaeus, 1758 to mix an ochre pigment (Henshilwood et al., 2011). Excavations of midden mounds on southern California's Channel Islands (Erlandson et al., 2011) revealed that 12,000 years ago the Paleoindians were seafaring, coastal foragers, consuming mussels (*Mytilus californianus* Conrad, 1837) and gastropods (*Haliotis rufescens* Swainson, 1822 and *Tegula funebris* (A. Adams, 1855), as *Chlorostoma funebris*). Far from coastal shorelines, the buried ruins of Templo Mayor, Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) have yielded ornaments made from 15 species of Pacific (Panamic) and Caribbean seashells. These ritual offerings were only encountered in Construction Phases V–VIII (1440–1520 C.E.) of the Templo, after the consolidation of their builders' empire from coast to coast (Velázquez Castro, 2007).

The Seris have for millennia lived along the Gulf of California coastline of northwest Sonora, Mexico. Although this culture is subtly and complexly intertwined with mollusks, the archaeological record is little studied; their midden mounds and ancient campsites contain ceramics and worked stones, and shell remains appear to be those primarily left after consumption. Their unique status is in the people today who talk of their hunter-gatherer parents and grandparents, and how they used, named and thought mythologically of mollusks—literally giving voices to mollusks. Where else can we hear a song (this book, pp. 169–170) about a yellow-footed gull (*Larus livens* Dwight, 1919) eating a sea hare (*Aplysia californica* J.G. Cooper, 1863)?

"The sea hare bursts,
The sea hare bursts,

Hatx cōcazoj immaptx

I burst it!

I burst it!"

Iiqui ihyamaptx

sung by Angelita Torres in her native, endangered language!

Shells on a Desert Shore (Figure 1) is a magnificent tour-de-force, a brilliant combination of marine biology, linguistics, ethnomalacology, and cultural history. It

describes the world of the *Comcaac* (the Seri people) and their relationships with mollusks.

Author Cathy Marlett grew up among them, playing with her childhood friends on the seashore near her family's home in the village of *Haxöl Iihom*. The very name of this village reflects the Seri people's immediacy with mollusks and their desert/ocean environment. It means, "the place of the *haxöl*" [that is, "clams," specifically *Leukoma grata* (Say, 1831)]. On Mexican maps it is called El Desemboque, referring to the "mouth of the river" (San Ignacio). Names and naming, uses and meanings, essential to the everyday life of these indigenous Mexican people, are the heart and soul of this book.

Information is presented in three parts, with eight appendices. Part I, "The Setting," introduces the Seri people and their language and physical setting, with an historical summary of previous descriptions of the Seri uses of mollusks. Most formative for Marlett were the decades she spent with her parents, Edward and Mary Beck Moser, living among the Seris. Based on decades of friendships and conversations, they recorded a wealth of material on the Seri language and culture. In addition to her own extensive interviews, her father's detailed notes (written on 3×5 inch paper slips) on Seri names with English translations and a brief description, form the oral history on which this book is based. She writes, "My research method primarily involved showing shells to people, as touching something seemed to be the best way to initiate recollections. . . . Nearly all of my research was done in the Seri language, which I have spoken since childhood" (pp. 13–14). This research methodology makes this book unique—the ethnographic, linguistic, biological, and cultural information was obtained by a "native speaking researcher," not one who had to learn an indigenous lifestyle nor language as an outsider.

Part II, "Mollusks in the Seri Culture," gives a thematic overview of Seri ethnography, including topics such as classification and naming (including orthography, grammar and meanings of Seri words), mythology and folklore, food, utensils (they did not shape the clam shells to form spoons or drinking utensils, but used them as is), medicine and recreation. A favorite boys' game was throwing *Chione californiensis* (Broderip, 1835) clam shells at a *cardón* cactus, the winner having the most stuck in the cactus (Figure 2).

Part III, "Species Accounts," comprises the majority of the text. Most species described are bivalves (80 species in 26 families) and gastropods (104 species in 49 families), but chitons and octopuses and other marine invertebrates are also covered. All species are illustrated with exquisite line drawings by the author; the Latin binomial is followed by a brief description of the shell and its distribution or occurrence. Known Seri names are given

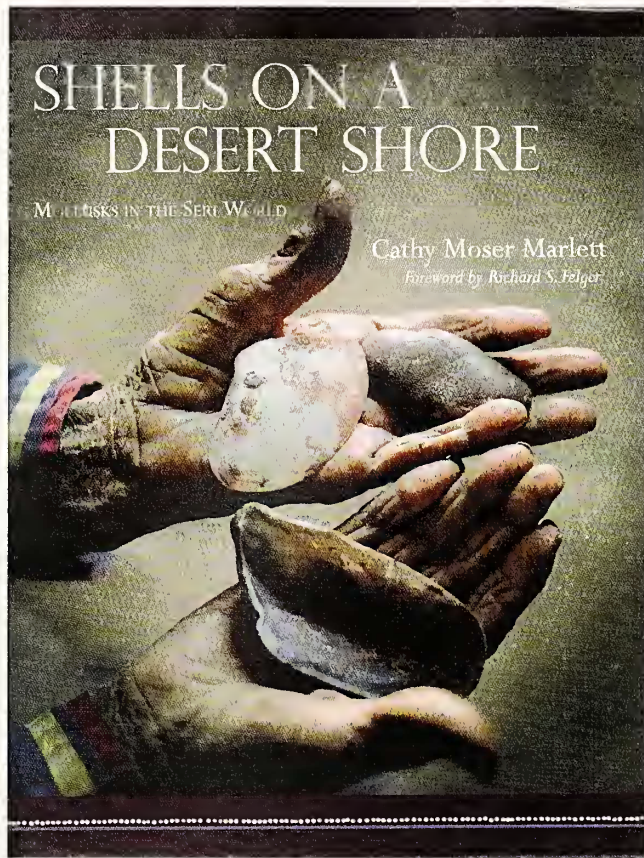


Figure 1. *Shells on a Desert Shore: Mollusks in the Seri World.*

and translated, along with their etymology. Known uses are described, often in quite personal terms: “Xavier Moreno and several other men free-dove for the thorny oyster (*Spondylus limbatus*) during the 1980s in areas to the north of Desemboque. . .Xavier described opening its shell underwater with a knife. . .[and] added rather matter-of-factly that in order to dive with confidence he had to decide beforehand that if the bivalve closed on his finger, trapping him underwater, he would be prepared and willing to cut off his own finger in order to free himself” (p. 102).

The large, vivid yellow *Laevicardium clatum* (G. B. Sowerby I, 1833) (its Seri name *xtiip* is a primary name, without a derived meaning) was the most heavily used shell in Seri culture. It was used as a food and pigment container, as a tool for excavating a grave or groundwater, as a dipper for water, cactus fruit wine or cooked sea turtle oil mixed with blood, as a cocoon rattle, and of course it was eaten (pp. 106–109).

Women paddled balsa canoes with pen shells [e.g., *Pinna rugosa* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1835)] when crossing to a nearby island for a pelican hunt. *Pinna rugosa* byssal fibers were sometimes sewn as hair to the head of a cloth doll (p. 90).

The slipper shell *Crepidula onyx* G.B. Sowerby I, 1824 was named *casquim quih iti ihij*, “where the pad-



Figure 2. *Chione californiensis* shells thrown by Seri children at a *cardón* cactus (Photo © C.M. Marlett).

dlers sits” (p. 141). Their name for *Plicopurpura pansa* Gould, 1853 translates as “ringworm medicine,” for its medicinal use (p. 153). They spent a lot of time in the intertidal zone under the hot, bright Sonoran sun, so when they found the brilliant yellow-orange slug *Berthellina ilisima* Marcus and Marcus, 1967 underneath a rock it was appropriate to name it *xepenozaali*, “sun in the sea” (p. 170).

Appendices 1–7 are scholarly linguistic charts, variously arranged for easy reference. Appendix 8 is a marvelous biographical recognition of Cathy Marlett’s consultants, many with portraits of these kind people.

Shells on a Desert Shore combines the highest linguistic (grammar, orthography, pronunciation, etc.) scholarship with cultural and natural history to explain the role of mollusks in the Seri world. Footnotes contain significant information, and are a “read in themselves.” The book is a poem, a multi-sensory experience of a disappearing lifestyle. Numerous photographs (historical and recent) illustrate the people, places and mollusks.

It is an honor to review this book; it has also been my privilege to have known and collaborated with Cathy Marlett. *Shells on a Desert Shore* can be read cover-to-cover, or selectively perused for a specific item of interest. I have done both. For anyone interested in the complex relations between mollusks and humans, the Gulf of California, or the natural history of living mollusks, this book must not only be in your bookcase, but it must also be well read and well used. In the Creation Myth of the Seri, *Conus princeps* Linnaeus, 1758 was sent out to test the newly-formed land to see if it had hardened (p. 165). This book will lead you on an equally engaging voyage of discovery.

LITERATURE CITED

- Erlandson, J.M., T.C. Rick, T.J. Braje, M. Casperson, B. Culleton, B. Fullfrost, T. Garcia, D.A. Guthrie, N. Jew, D.J. Kennett, M.L. Moss, L. Reeder, C. Skinner, J. Watts, and L. Willis. 2011. Paleoindian seafaring, maritime technologies, and coastal foraging on California's Channel Islands. *Science* 331(6021): 1181–1185.
- Henshilwood, C.S., F. d'Errico, K.L. van Niekerk, Y. Coquinot, Z. Jacobs, S.-E. Lauritzen, M. Menu, and R. García-Moreno. 2011. A 100,000-year-old ochre-processing workshop at Blombos Cave, South Africa. *Science* 334(6053): 219–222.
- Velázquez Castro, A. 2007. La producción especializada de los objetos de concha del Templo Mayor de Tenochtitlan. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City, 202 pp.

Hans Bertsch

Instituto de Investigaciones Oceanológicas
Universidad Autónoma de Baja California
Ensenada, Mexico
Mailing address:
192 Imperial Beach Blvd. #A
Imperial Beach, CA 91932 USA
hansmarvida@sbcglobal.net